

Church hall extension scheme sparks row

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A FURIOUS spat has broken out between Highland Council's conservation officer and architects over an extension to the West Church Hall in Dornoch.

Conservation officer Kerry Hawthorne has condemned Inverurie firm William Lippe Architects' vision of a 441 square metre extension to the Church of Scotland hall.

She claimed their contemporary glass and timber design would be "damaging" to a historic building and has recommended that planning consent be refused.

But angry architects have retorted in a stinging rebuke that her judgement has been "clouded" by a lack of understanding of the project and have demanded she withdraw her comments.

Concerns have also been raised by North Highland forestry officer Nick Richards, who is worried about the effects a proposed terrace will have on a mature lime tree at the front of the church.

Ambitious plans to turn the church hall into an £800,000 community hub offering health, therapeutic and social services were unveiled last year.

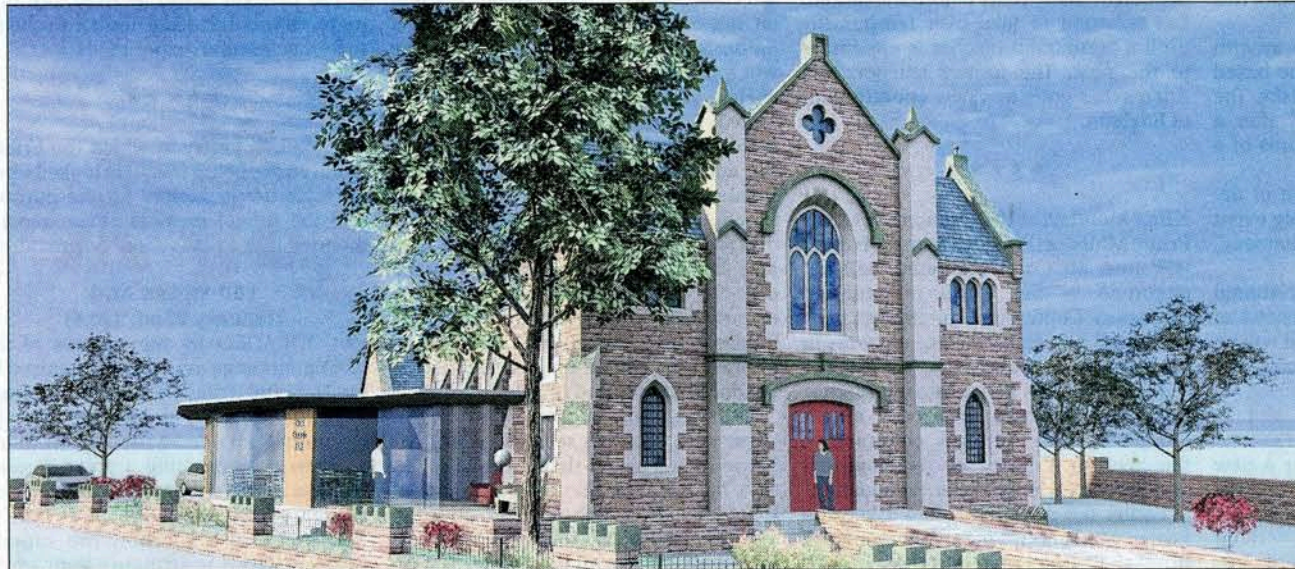
The "Creag Mhor" (Big Rock) project was outlined to the community at an open day.

The proposal include redesigning the hall's interior and expanding the space by fashioning a first storey and adding an extension.

The church hopes to raise £150,000 of the capital costs locally, with the remainder coming from grant awarding public and private bodies.

An application for planning consent was lodged in October and has still to be decided.

However, according to background papers, Ms Hawthorne is unhappy that the



A visual of the proposed extension to the West Church Hall in Dornoch.

flat roof of the new extension runs halfway along the four arched windows on the south side of the building.

In an email written on December 3rd, and posted on the authority's eplanning site, she states: "I do wonder if the design couldn't be more sensitive to the detailing of the south elevation. Does it need to cut through all windows and buttresses or could it be reduced in length to allow some to remain unaffected."

"Alternatively, could it have a different roof line in different materials to allow the windows to remain complete within the extension but visible externally."

Ms Hawthorne also does not like a raised terrace shown on the architectural drawings. She deems it to be out of character for the conservation area and also queries whether the lack of railings is a safety issue.

The conservation officer goes on to comment on the impact the new extension will have on surrounding trees, which she says should be protected.

She concludes: "The current application, if approved, is likely to result in loss of original fabric and detail to a key building in the conservation area and result in a form of development which is damaging to a historic building."

"I raise no issue with the principle of the proposed development but would request that the current scheme is withdrawn or refused to allow the design and detailing to be reconsidered."

On 5th December, William Lippe Architects responded in a letter which has also been made public.

The firm stated that in its opinion, Ms Hawthorne had strayed well outwith her

remit by making comments on the need for safety railings which, it was claimed, was a technical matter for building control.

Ms Hawthorne was also criticised for commenting on the tree issue when forestry officer Nick Richard had already made his feelings known.

The letter continues: "A contemporary extension to a traditional building is an extremely successful and sensitive way of adding modern accommodation to an old building and identifying the 21st century contribution."

"We are extremely surprised that the conservation officer has not seen similar extensions before and how these can be attached successfully to traditional buildings without affecting the existing fabric."

"The overall concept is one that the extension could be removed at the end of its life

span, leaving the original building intact."

The letter concluded: "In summary, it was with extreme disappointment that we read the conservation officer's comments but understand that she does not have all the facts and information, that her judgement has been clouded by the lack of understanding of the project."

"We would have expected a conservation officer to have entered into a discussion with the architects involved."

The architects also wrote that Ms Hawthorne's suggestion that the application be withdrawn or refused was an "insult" to them. In turn, they demanded she withdraw her statement.

Planning officer Gillian Webster, who is dealing with the West Church Hall application, told the Northern Times that a meeting is to be held shortly in a bid to iron out various planning issues.

Dornoch Cathedral minister Rev Susan Brown said William Lippe Architects had designed a number of church extensions in the north, including one at the United Reformed Church in Nairn.

She said: "Church extensions are either exactly the same as the main building or a contrast. We just cannot afford like for like materials, so it has to be a contrast. Although the hall is in a conservation area, it is not a listed building."

However, Rev Brown explained that it would be some time before the extension went ahead.

"It is in three phases and the extension is the third phase which is a long way away," she said.

"The first phase is the refurbishment of the hall which will involve gutting the inside and installing new heating. The second phase will be to put in a first floor."

"The project is taking shape and the plan the architects have come up with for the inside is fantastic."